

The World According to Paul: Comedy and Theology in “Joseph Andrews”

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Article:

ALTHOUGH THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT of Fielding’s first novel and its comic techniques have been much discussed, I propose to combine these perspectives, to interpret the novel’s comedy through a biblical passage, I Corinthians 3: 18-19, which, given the nature of Parson Adams’ folly, surprisingly has not been made a key to interpretation.¹ These verses from Paul’s epistle bring together comedy and theology in *Joseph Andrews*. In them he advised the Christians of Corinth: “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him be a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” The passage illustrates a fundamental motif of comedy, the inversion often called “the world upside down.”² What seems to be wisdom in the ways of the world is, to the Christian, mostly folly; conversely, apparent foolishness unconcerned with worldly ends, is not folly at all but, in the Christian perspective, wisdom, since it follows God’s ways rather than man’s.

Fielding’s fictional representation of this Pauline statement of the divine comedy fits well Bergson’s description of comic inversion: “Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene. . . . There is no necessity, however, for both the identical scenes to be played before us. We may be shown only one, provided the other is really in our minds. Thus, we laugh at the prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate; at a child presuming to teach its parents; in a word, at everything that comes under the heading of ‘topsyturvydom.’³ Parson Adams’s advising his incredulous, worldly “betters” in their houses or coaches is ridiculous; the worldly expect him to behave more like Parson Supple in *Tom Jones*, who lectures Squire Western at church but tolerates his folly elsewhere. Even Adams asserts “that Mr. Adams at church with his surplice on, and Mr. Adams without that ornament, in any other place, were two very different persons.”⁴ But the inversions caused by Adams are not only comically surprising; they are also Christian.

Fielding was undoubtedly familiar with the Pauline text and with the tradition of praising folly that arose from it in the middle ages and the Renaissance. He even included Paul among those authors whose works combine humour and seriousness, when he wrote in the *Covent-Garden Journal*:

It is from a very common but a very false Opinion that we constantly mix the Idea of Levity with those of Wit and Humour. The gravest of Men have often possessed these Qualities in a very eminent Degree, and have exerted them on the most solemn Subjects with very eminent Success. These are to be found in many Places in the most serious Works of Plato and Aristotle, of Cicero and Seneca.... Not to mention the Instance of St. Paul, whose writings do in my Opinion contain more true Wit, than is to be found in the Works of the unjustly celebrated Petronius.⁵

Joseph Andrews itself displays Fielding’s knowledge of later “praisers of folly,” as Walter Kaiser calls them. One of the authors the pious Joseph has read is Thomas a Kempis, whose *Imitatio Christi* helped inaugurate this tradition by prescribing “a life which, in its pietistic simplicity and humility, resembled that of the fool.”⁶ And Fielding’s numerous allusions support the claim of the title page that *Joseph Andrews* was “Written in Imitation

of the Manner of Cervantes, Author of *Don Quixote* ” (p.), and show that his familiarity with the “last fool” of this Renaissance tradition was thorough. The Don is the praiser of folly closest to Adams, for according to Kaiser, whereas earlier figures were fools because they “refused to accept what was universally accepted by the world,” Don Quixote “is a fool because he is the only person left who still accepts these things.”⁷ Adams’s assumptions about a Christian society are similar. Fielding does not allude to the wise fools of Erasmus or Rabelais in *Joseph Andrews*, but he does refer to Shakespeare’s Falstaff in Book II, Chapter 14. In *Tom Jones* Fielding reaffirms his allegiance to this tradition by invoking genius: “Come thou, that hast inspired . . . thy Cervantes, thy Rabelais . . . thy Shakespeare. . . fill my pages with humour; till mankind learn the good-nature not to laugh only at the follies of others, and the humility to grieve at their own.”⁸

In addition to descending directly from these praisers of folly, Parson Adams resembles, in the essential juxtaposition of the comic and the Christian in his character, the Holy Fool of eastern Christianity, also of Pauline origins. According to M. Conrad Hyers, in Russia between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries a kind of sainthood emerged “in which the expression of piety was that of publicly making a fool of oneself”; a monk acted like a clown, indicating his self-effacement “by making himself ridiculous in his appearance and performance and thus becoming the object of mockery,” and abasing himself “through a holy madness, feigned or real . . . either in a renunciation of spiritual pride or in a revelation of the folly of the people.”⁹ Fielding’s comic parson functions like an Anglican Holy Fool, ridiculed by others as he reveals their folly, though Fielding likely knew nothing of this tradition. Furthermore, the ridiculousness of this character, like the humbling of the Holy Fool, suggests “a comic identification with the humiliation of Jesus — the Jesus that is not only a tragic but a comic hero who assumes the burdens of others as the butt of the joke, the carpenter who is hailed as king by being given a crown of thorns and a cross for a throne . . . the scapegoat sent forth in mock regal robes who ironically saves others but cannot save himself.”¹⁰ Adams’s helplessness is similar. His unfailing desire to imitate the example of Christ accords well with Robert M. Torrance’s description of the comic hero, who is “no less subject to humiliation and defeat than any other mortal, even though his willingness to risk— and indeed to invite that defeat may prove to be his most enduring and irrevocable triumph.”¹¹

One other feature distinguishing Parson Adams from praisers of folly like Quixote and joining him to the Holy Fool is his vocation. Indeed, Fielding was so conscious of possible offence with his comic parson that he devoted the last paragraph of his preface to the reader’s attitude:

As to the character of Adams, as it is the most glaring in the whole, so I conceive it is not to be found in any book now extant. It is designed a character of perfect simplicity; and as the goodness of his heart will recommend him to the good-natured, so I hope it will excuse me to the gentlemen of his cloth; for whom, while they are worthy of their sacred order, no man can possibly have greater respect. They will therefore excuse me, notwithstanding the low adventures in which he is engaged, that I have made him a clergyman; since no other office could have given him so many opportunities of displaying his worthy inclinations. (p. 12)

The opposition of “worthy inclinations” and “sacred order” to the “low adventures” that make him so “glaring” suggests the world upside down in the novel. “Low” also recalls Fielding’s description of the comic romance, which includes “persons of inferior rank, and consequently, of inferior manners,” and the novel’s general conflict of vanities described in “A dissertation concerning high people and low people” in Book II. That Adams’s “perfect simplicity” is essential to his folly we can appreciate from Fielding’s “A Modern Glossary” from the *Covent-Garden Journal*. There, using the definitions of “the World,” Fielding describes a fool as “A complex Idea, compounded of Poverty, Honesty, Piety, and Simplicity.”¹² In addition to being simple, Adams is poor, earning only twenty-three pounds annually; honest, telling more truth than innkeepers or other parsons want to hear; and pious, making his work “little less than a law in his parish . . . by an uniform behaviour of thirty-five years’ duration” (p. 39). Fielding defines worth as “Power. Rank. Wealth” and wisdom as “The Art of acquiring all Three.”¹³ Adams’s antagonists are artful in acquiring power, rank, and wealth, at least relative to their inferiors. Such an inversion of folly and wisdom provides both an essential theme and comic technique in *Joseph Andrews*.

When Fielding's Holy Fool appears in the second chapter, his simplicity is reiterated; Adams is "as entirely ignorant of the ways of the world as an infant just entered into it could possibly be" (p. 17). Mrs. Slipslop at once epitomizes Adams's comic antagonists by insisting that "a deference be paid to her understanding, as she had been frequently at London, and knew more of the world than a country parson could pretend to" (p. 19). The "world" laughs at and demands respect from Adams because of his folly. Fielding later uses this opposition for a chapter title in Book II: "A very curious adventure in which Mr. Adams gave a much greater instance of the honest simplicity of his heart than of his experience in the ways of this world" (p. 145). Adams comes closest here to disillusionment, after being duped by a genteel promiser, who praised Adams for having "the true principles of a Christian divine" by "esteeming his poor parishioners as a part of his family" (p. 46). Discovering that he had been the butt of a jest, Adam declares, "Good Lord... what wickedness is there in the Christian world ! I profess almost equal to what I have read of the heathens" (p. 150). Adams's folly in not seeing that Christianity "of the true primitive kind" is no longer embraced by the world is comic, but this comedy is the Pauline kind, in which misreading appearances reveals both the truth about the world and the Christian ideal against which the world is judged.

Throughout *Joseph Andrews* the Pauline opposition of worldly wisdom and Christian folly gives Adams's comical adventures theological resonance. For example, in his conversation with Parson Trulliber Adams generates considerable comedy by asking for a loan in these words: "I therefore request you to assist me with the loan of those seven shillings, and also seven shillings more, which, peradventure, I shall return to you; but if not, I am convinced you will joyfully embrace such an opportunity of laying up a treasure in a better place than any this world affords" (p. 140). Trulliber calls Adams "fool" and answers with complacent wisdom: "Sir, I believe I know where to lay up my little treasure as well as another; I thank G—, if I am not so warm as some, I am content; that is a blessing greater than riches; and he to whom that is given need ask no more. To be content with a little is greater than to possess the world; which a man may possess without being so. Lay up my treasure! what matters where a man's treasure is whose heart is in the Scriptures? there is the treasure of a Christian" (p. 140). This pious hypocrisy is turned upside down by Adams's insistence on charity, so that Trulliber finds himself uncomfortably the preacher preached to, the gentle-man-farmer upbraided by a beggar. As so often in the novel, Adams's basis for upsetting his antagonist is a book, here the "Scriptures," of which he says, "there is no command more express, no duty more frequently enjoined than charity" (pp. 141-42). Such is the inversion of the scene which began with Trulliber "conceiving no great respect for the appearance of his guest" (p. 138).

Adams's encounter with Peter Pounce in Book III is similar. The episode begins with Pounce, wanting "someone to whom he might communicate his grandeur" (p. 231), offering Adams a ride. They, too, quarrel about wealth and charity, which Pounce ridicules as "a mean parson-like quality" beneath gentlemen like himself. He also scorns the world: "I am not the man the world esteems me . . . Pray, my good neighbour, where should I have that quantity of riches the world is so liberal to bestow on me?" (pp. 233-34). When Adams underestimates Pounce's wealth, however, he is mocked as a "shabby" figure with "a pitiful curacy." Adams creates the inversion by leaping out of Pounce's vehicle after saying, "I value not your chariot of a rush; and if I had known you had intended to affront me, I would have walked to the world's end on foot ere I would have accepted a place in it" (p. 234). The rebuff of the wise Pounce by the foolish Adams again joins comedy and theology.

Such scenes abound in *Joseph Andrews*, for, as Fielding comments, "life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous" (p. to). Adams's encounters with Trulliber and Pounce are two of the most comic. They have a common feature in the worldly character's disrespect for Adams's soiled and torn cassock, which represents Adams's literal application of his reading. Like Don Quixote, Adams often seems foolish because he acts on the basis of texts read, remembered, and sometimes quoted. But rather than *Amadis of Gaul* and other chivalric romances, the Bible and theology drive Adams to much of his folly. We can connect the cassock, ironically enough, to Adams's reading of George Whitefield, with whom he disagrees strenuously on justification by faith. Speaking to Parson Barnabas, who objects to Whitefield's interpreting the Bible literally

and thus wanting the clergy to live simply, in “poverty and low estate,” Adams remarks: “I am, myself, as great an enemy to the luxury and splendor of the clergy as he [Whitefield] can be. I do not, more than he, by the flourishing estate of the Church, understand the palaces, equipages, dress, furniture, rich dainties, and vast fortunes of her ministers. Surely those things, which savour so strongly of this world become not the servants of one who professed his kingdom was not of it” (p. 67). Hence Adams’s offensive cassock, like so much else about him, incarnates the theology he has read and found consistent with scripture.

We might also note in this conversation Adams’s praise of Benjamin Hoadley’s *A Plain Account of the Nature and End of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper*, which presents the sacrament as a “Symbol of *Union in Society* amongst Men,” in which Christians “publicly acknowledge [Christ] to be their Master, and Themselves to be His Disciples: and, by doing this in an Assembly, own Themselves, with all other Christians, to be One *Body* or Society, under Him the Head; and consequently profess themselves to be under his Governance and Influence; to have *Communion* or Fellowship with *Him, as Head*, and with all their Christian Brethren, as *Fellow-Members* of that same *Body* of which He is the *Head*.”“ Adams’s praise of this book echoes Hoadley’s words: “For what could tend more to the noble purposes of religion than frequent cheerful meetings among the members of a society, in which they should, in the presence of one another, and in the service of the Supreme Being, make promises of being good, friendly, and benevolent to each other?” (p. 68). One effect of reading Hoadley can be seen in Book IV, when Mrs. Adams resents her husband’s view “that the whole parish are his children” and accordingly blames him for injuring his family “with his foolish tricks” (pp. 277, 278). This statement puts her in agreement with Lady Booby, who tells her, “your husband is acting a very foolish part, and opposing his own interest” (p. 277). Adams is foolish to these worldly wise women because, in a nominally Christian society, he applies and expects others to apply the wisdom of Hoadley to living. So he restates the Christian’s “duty to look upon all his neighbours as his brothers and sisters and love them accordingly” (p. 278).

Echoes of scripture, perhaps of Hoadley on the headship of Christ, can also be heard in a dialogue of Adams and Lady Booby about publishing the banns for Joseph and Fanny. Following Lady Booby’s threat that she “will recommend it to your master, the doctor, to discard you from his service,” Adams replies indignantly: “I know not what your ladyship means by the terms ‘master’ and ‘service.’ I am in the service of a Master who will never discard me for doing my duty; and if the doctor (for indeed I have never been able to apply for a license) thinks proper to turn me out from my cure, God will provide me, I hope, another” (pp. 241-42). The lady’s mockery of this poverty, honesty, piety, and simplicity shows her belief in Adams’s folly, but her jealous defensiveness in the episode exposes again the folly of her own vain pursuit of Joseph. Adams inverts the master/servant relationship of church hierarchy and class so that all, including the lady, are seen *as* servants of God in this episode.

The novel’s final scene culminates such inversions in the parish church where Joseph and Fanny marry. There Adams rebukes Mr. Booby and Pamela “for laughing in so sacred a place, and so solemn an occasion.” Then Fielding reports: “Our parson would have done no less to the highest prince on earth: for, though he paid all submission and deference to his superiors in other matters, where the least spice of religion intervened, he immediately lost all respect of persons. It was his maxim, that he was a servant of the Highest, and could not, without departing from his duty, give up the least article of his honour, or of his cause, to the greatest earthly potentate” (p. 296). In church at the comedy’s conclusion, where the novelist’s fantasy enables the satisfaction of justice, Adams can enforce the wisdom of God on worldly fools like these, as he cannot do elsewhere, when he can only momentarily turn the world upside down.

Adams himself is sometimes foolish without being wise, as when he is too worldly in travelling to London with his sermons or when he is unrealistic in giving advice about submission to Fanny and Joseph. In both cases he is punished, first discovering that his wife replaced the sermons in his saddlebags with shirts and, second, bearing the news of his son’s apparent drowning. When the child is spared, Adams’s joy is “as extravagant as his grief had been before; he kissed and embraced his son a thousand times, and danced around the room like one frantic” (p. 266). Though he immediately lapses into more advice about consolation, his error is forgivable, since it results from teaching the ways of God that he is too imperfect to practice completely.” And his

seemingly foolish joy is an essential part of his religious nature, too. When Fanny and Joseph are first reunited, he is seen “dancing about the room in a rapture of joy,” and later, when they marry, he displays “an appetite surprising, as well as surpassing, everyone present” and “more facetiousness than was usual with him” (pp. 13.1, 297). Adams’s apparent folly is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, which is unknown to the worldly fools who mock him.

Though the Pauline principle of comedy is most fully incarnated in the adventures of Parson Adams, this motif also informs the histories of Joseph and Mr. Wilson. For example, when Joseph first refuses the advances of Lady Booby she accuses him: “you either are a fool, or pretend to be so” (p. 23). This worldly wise woman cannot comprehend Joseph’s chastity, which, he later remarks, “is owing entirely to [Adams’s] excellent sermons and advice, together with [Pamela’s] letters” (p. 37). Like Adams’s folly, Joseph’s has been fostered partly by his reading. Joseph’s father, Mr. Wilson, similarly finds his life of retirement “from a world full of bustle, noise, hatred, envy, and ingratitude, to ease, quiet, and love” ridiculed as foolish: “most of the neighbourhood taking us for very strange people; the squire of the parish representing me as a madman, and the parson as a Presbyterian; because I will not hunt with the one nor drink with the other” (p. 189). Wilson, in fact, states the godly side of the Pauline admonition: “I had sufficiently seen that the pleasures of the world are chiefly folly” (p. 188).¹⁶

The novel’s world is finally turned upside down according to Paul. Though the Wilsons’ idyll is marred by a worldly neighbour, they later discover their lost son Joseph, whose foolish virtue permits “rewards so great and sweet that... Joseph neither envied the noblest duke, nor Fanny the finest duchess, that night [of their wedding]” (p. 297). The folly of Joseph, Mr. Wilson, and Parson Adams is exalted; what had earlier passed for wisdom is ridiculed. The novel’s conclusion glimpses the fate of worldliness: “As for the Lady Booby, she returned to London in a few days, where a young captain of dragoons, together with eternal parties at cards, soon obliterated the memory of Joseph” (p. 98). Fielding’s Christian comedy may reward the wise, but it leaves the worldly in pursuit of folly.

Thus I cannot agree with Jeffrey M. Perl’s recent “anagogic” reading of *Joseph Andrews*, which finds the novel’s “boy loves girl story” to be its essence — “a biological imperative, a psychological necessity,” and a religious “good of the highest kind.”¹⁷ Even though there is some justification for Perl’s conclusion that this surface of *Joseph Andrews* contain its deepest meaning, his reading neglects too much the significance of Parson Adams, especially in describing “good of the highest kind.”¹⁸ The reader performs an equally important act as he moves through laughter to discernment to recognize the wisdom of Adams’s folly. Like the boy-loves-girl plot, the story of Adams unsettles the reader’s nominal religion and conventional wisdom before reshaping his understanding of what constitutes a wise and holy man. As Wolfgang Iser points out, the reader is trapped when he laughs at Adams because he then implicitly sides with the worldly to maintain his superiority to the parson, instead of seeing himself through Adams’s virtues, which would be too unsettling. Through a process Iser calls “the concretization of a hitherto virtual morality,” the actions of Adams, which initially appear ridiculous because, even though Christian in motive, they don’t bring success and may actually hinder it, come to seem wiser than those of the worldly, who are more ridiculous in their vanity and hypocrisy.¹⁹ As the reader proceeds, Fielding compels him repeatedly to turn the perspective of the world upside down, so that he finally judges the unworldly fool to be a holy fool, a fundamental figure of the novel’s Christian comedy.

Notes:

1. Criticism has tended to emphasize either the Christian or the comic in *Joseph Andrews*. On the Christian basis of the novel see Martin C. Battestin, *The Moral Basis of Fielding’s Art: A Study of Joseph Andrews* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1959) and Aubrey Williams, “Interpositions of Providence and the Design of Fielding’s Novels,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 70 (1971), 265-86. On comic aspects of the novel see Mark Spilka, “Comic Resolution in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*,” *College English*, 15 (1953), 11-19; Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 140-45; and Homer Goldberg, *The Art of Joseph Andrews* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969). A

- valuable synthesis of the comic and the religious in later fiction can be found in Robert M. Polhemus, *Comic Faith.. The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).
2. For a discussion of this motif, including brief comments on *Joseph Andrews*, see Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down; Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).
 3. Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 121.
 4. *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Battestin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), pp. 296-97. All references are to this edition.
 5. *The Covent-Garden Journal*, ed. Gerard Edward Jensen (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1915), I, 24.3-44. William B. Coley provides an excellent discussion of the seriousness of Fielding's comedy in "The Background of Fielding's Laughter," *ELH*, 26 (1959), 229-52.
 6. *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, No. 25 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), p. 9. See also Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber, 1935), especially pp. 236-42; Roy Battenhouse, "Falstaff as Parodist and Perhaps Holy Fool," *PMLA* 90 (1975), 32-52; and R. Chris Hassel, Jr., *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies* (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980).
 7. Kaiser, p. 288. On Adams and Quixote, see also Goldberg, pp. 73-85; and Susan G. Auty, *The Comic Spirit of Eighteenth-Century Novels* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975), PP. 42-46.
 8. *Tom Jones*, ed. R. P. C. Mutter (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), p. 608.
 9. "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred," *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*, ed. Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 19-20.
 10. Hyers, p. 20. Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), also finds this motif among the "Popular-Festive Forms" on which Rabelais drew for his comedy. Bakhtin writes: "Rabelais recalls Seneca's words (without naming him and apparently quoting from Erasmus) that kings and clowns have the same horoscope. It is obvious that he also knew the Gospel story of the mock crowning, uncrowning, and scourging of 'the king of the Jews'" (p. 198).
 11. *The Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), p. 11. On Parson Adams, see pp. 185-97.
 12. *The Covent-Garden Journal*, I, 154.
 13. *The Covent-Garden Journal*, I, 155.
 14. *A Plain Account of the Nature and End of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* (London: James, John and Paul Knapton, 1735), pp. 35, 38.
 15. J. Paul Hunter presents another reason for Adams's imperfection in *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975), pp.
 16. For a thorough discussion of the Wilson episode see Battestin, *The Moral Basis of Fielding's Art*, pp. 44-51, 118-29.
 17. "Anagogic Surfaces: How to Read *Joseph Andrews*," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and interpretation*, 22 (1981), 266.
 18. Discussions of *Joseph Andrews* as a romance have also tended to place more emphasis on the Joseph-Fanny plot and to deflect attention away from Adams. See, for example, Sheridan Baker, "Henry Fielding's Comic Romances," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, 43 (1960), 411-19, and "Fielding's Comic-Epic-in-Prose Romances Again," *Philological Quarterly*, 58 (1979), 63-81; and Melvyn New, "'The Grease of God': The Form of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction," *PMLA*, 91 (1976), 235-44.
 19. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 217-18.